

N
RF

**WATCHING COWS AND FIGHTING DEVIL-FISH: AN OVERVIEW OF
HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE SITE OF THE S.S. POMONA
FT. ROSS STATE HISTORIC PARK**

John W. Foster

California Council for the Promotion of History Conference

Long Beach, California

Oct. 27, 2001

Introduction

St. Patrick's Day, 1908, was a typical brisk spring afternoon on the north coast of California. A rising wind swept the sea from the northwest, and a large swell was running. There was an uncomfortable chop caused by wind waves and whitecaps. It was into this sea that Capt. Swansen cleared Pt. Bonita from the Pacific Coast Steamship Company docks in San Francisco, and set course for Eureka. He stood at the helm of the Steamship Pomona. His vessel had made this run many times, but he could not have suspected that the great ship, known as the "Pride of the Coaster Fleet," would never again cross the Humboldt bar. Its 147 passengers and crew were about to become witness to maritime history and underwater archaeology.

Sixty-seven years had passed since the Russians had given up their foothold in California and sold to John Sutter. Ft. Ross had become a center for shipping lumber products under a loading chute. Local ranching operations also played an important part in the regional economy. Fishing was also important, and it was not uncommon to see a dozen or more turn-of-the-century vessels moored in the cove. But March 17, 1908 was a date that would forever be remembered on the Sonoma coast.

The Wreck

Passengers on the Pomona were uncomfortable. Accustomed to celebrating their St. Patrick's Day on more solid footing, they were tossed by a restless sea. Many took to their cabins. Upon clearing Pt. Reyes, the captain ordered a course change to the northeast. He thought they might find more comfortable conditions and better speed in the lee of Pt. Arena. Besides, he could save on coal, as the company requested, and ease pressure on his boilers. He had taken this route many times before, but it proved to be a fateful decision.

White water was everywhere on the horizon and no boil or breaker gave clue to the hidden rocks ahead. One passenger later reported the ship was so close in that, "You could see the color of a cow on the hillside." Shortly

after 6pm the ship lurched violently as she struck an uncharted pinnacle two miles south of Ft. Ross reef. Perhaps this was a rock thrust up by the recent earthquake, later reports would say. The crew immediately assessed damage. Although the ship was free of the reef, a gaping hole had been punched in the steel hull. The pumps were called to prevent the ship's loss. Capt. Swansen, a veteran of many years sailing the redwood coast, calmly decided his only course of action was to beach the vessel in Ft. Ross cove to save her. He ordered full steam and maximum effort on the pumps. The steamer gave her best. She reached a speed of 13.2 knots as frightened passengers gathered their belongings.

As she approached the fort, the great ship foundered. She was down by the bow with six feet of water in the hold. The helm was sluggish and unresponsive. In desperation, Capt. Swansen steered into the cove, but a wash rock loomed dead ahead. Passengers and crew braced for the impact. Within seconds, the rock dealt a fatal blow to the great ship. She rode up over the top on her keel, only to become impaled through the hull and held fast in the swirling sea -- a victim of a "stern and rock-bound coast." She slowly twisted her bow to face the sea as she settled ever lower in the water.

Young Carlos A. Call had seen the black smoke from her stack and raced to assist the stricken vessel. Seven years prior, in 1901, he had saved six

seamen from the schooner J. Eppinger by swimming a rescue line out to the distressed ship before she was smashed to pieces on the rocks of Ft. Ross cove. When he reached the bluff edge, the Pomona had begun to settle into her grave. Passengers were in a near panic as Capt. Swansen ordered the boats away. A guide boat carried a lantern to shore, marking the route for other boats. They disembarked in the growing twilight as Carlos took photos. With considerable seamanship, all passengers were safely landed on shore, with Capt. Swansen arriving in the last boat. Thus began an underwater archaeological site that brings us together today.

Initial Salvage Efforts

Initial salvage efforts of the S.S. Pomona were soon commenced. The Coast Wrecking Company purchased rights to the wreck and began work. The plan was to remove most of the cargo and refloat the vessel by inflating canvas bags throughout the hull. Then the ship could be towed back to San Francisco to dry dock for repairs.

This hardhat diving was begun in earnest, but not without its dangers, as reported by the San Francisco Chronicle (Sept. 28, 1908):

Diver Fights With Octopus

"Martin Lund, a diver for the Pacific Coast Wrecking Company, had a terrible experience with a monster devil fish while he was in seven fathoms of water Saturday afternoon at Fort Ross cove, working on the Pomona, which was wrecked some months ago. Lund was in the hold of the wrecked vessel, when he was seized about the leg by the tentacle of a devilfish. He slashed at the fish with his knife and gave the signal to be hoisted. The devilfish had too strong a hold on him, and he had to signal the helpers to ease their efforts to haul him to the surface because his helmet was giving way. Another tentacle grasped him about the waist, and still another about the neck. Then another grasped him about the legs and he had to fight hard for life. After cutting two of the tough tentacles that grasped him in a deathlike embrace, Lund saw the creature preparing to strike with its beak, and made a lunge for the head just in time to deal a death blow."

It finally became apparent that the Pomona would never leave Ft. Ross cove. Her prop was salvaged, along with her triple expansion steam engine. Salvage master Capt. Whitelaw, using his steam schooner Greenwood, did the recovery. Many salvageable steam valves, pipes, fittings, tools and instruments were no doubt removed. Finally, she broke in two on Nov. 21st and slipped forever beneath the waves.

Sports Divers Raise Relics

For 51 years, the bones of the steamer were the exclusive realm of abalone, fishes and devil-fish. In 1959, a group of skin divers discovered the site. Led by Robert Lanham, the divers explored the Pomona wreckage and recovered many nautical treasures. Over the next decade, portholes were wrenched from hull plates and brass keys, teacups and fittings were raised. Some of these items were given to the new Ft. Ross State Historic Park, but most were carried off as treasures from the site (Anonymous:1971). As SCUBA diving became more popular, the Pomona site gave up many more brass pieces and small artifacts.

Archaeological Research Efforts

In April, 1981, the first systematic underwater survey conducted by State Parks took place at Ft. Ross cove. This was a combined effort using the Navy Diving Salvage Team, State Park divers, and many interested divers and supporters. It began with a magnetometer survey of most of both coves from shoal water to the 120-ft. contour. A 200-ft. grid spacing was established by marker buoys. Lanes were run in the research vessel from a north-south and east-west direction. As anomalies were located, they were marked by a chase boat and investigated by dive teams. Position was

maintained by LORAN, and anomalies were charted by transit from two stations on the bluff above (Foster 1981).

In conjunction with the electronic surveillance, a systematic swim survey was conducted for this project over a 200 x 1000-ft. anchorage area inside north point. Historical documentation indicated this was the lumber chute anchorage. Using a 10-foot tag line, dive teams covered the bottom in a systematic survey. April visibility averaged about 10 feet or less.

A total of 55 separate anomalies were distinguished by the magnetometer. These could be grouped into six "clusters" ranging in depth from 100 to 40 ft. SCUBA investigation of these targets found four of them occurred on sand bottoms without visible metal artifacts. They may have been false readings or buried in the sand. Cluster 5 was identified as the Regia, a 45-ft. fishing vessel. Cluster 6 was a very good approximation of the Pomona's wreckage. Although no systematic mapping was attempted, a brief record of the wreck elements was made. The drive train, boilers, forward hull and individual artifacts were noted and photographed. The overall condition and distribution of wreckage was documented. It became apparent that a more concentrated mapping effort was needed.

The swim survey resulted in the documentation of two large anchors that presumably formed part of the lumber schooner anchorage system. They

were "admiralty style" with 6-ft. shafts and 4 feet between the flukes. The anchors were accompanied by six-in. stud-link chain, wrapped around large boulders. They appeared to be intentionally set as part of the mooring system (Foster:1984). Our 1981 survey was a success. Many targets were identified, and the Pomona's location was charted for the first time. As anthropologists, of course, we did our best to interview the locals in order to give proper context to our survey findings. This fellow seemed knowledgeable, but we were never able to understand him.

New information on the Pomona shipwreck site accumulated slowly over the years. Using State Park divers and with the help of Jim Delgado, maritime historian from GGNRA, incremental progress was made. The drive train details were documented and measured, but the rest of the vessel remained mysterious.

The next research effort came with Jack Hunter's 1988 survey. Lacking the divers necessary to carry out a mapping effort with underwater, Hunter was asked to perform a mapping exercise using underwater video. The concept was to tag important features and to thoroughly document the wreck from above by video camera. Using still images from the video, an attempt was made to piece together a composite map. Scale and compass orientation were to come from traditional measurements. The concept was sound, but diving conditions would never allow for adequate detail to be documented

by video alone. Between the constant surge, bull kelp canopy and murky conditions, repeated video mapping efforts were frustrated. Hunter and his team were able to make some advances. A site record was completed and assigned the number SON-1704H, but the Pomona wreck site remained poorly defined (Hunter and Fisher 1989).

The project effort reported today was designed and led by Charles Beeker from Indiana University. Working with students from USD, CSU Northridge, San Jose State University and Sonoma State, an efficient collaboration made possible a great leap forward in the understanding of the site. From their 1998 field work, not only was a detailed map prepared, but the shipwreck remains were used to prepare drawings of the breakdown of the Pomona itself as she slowly broke her back on the wash rock. The site formation process was illustrated. This has brought to life, the watery history of Ft. Ross cove.

One other aspect is worthy of mention for those who may be contemplating similar undertakings. Using Indiana University resources, a web site was established in advance. Then, as the project progressed, daily information was posted on the site. Each student was assigned to write in a "Scientist's Log" giving their own personal account of the work and its meaning. Maps, photos and historical details were placed in cyberspace. This effort allowed others at the university, and potentially anywhere, to stay connected to the

project, ask questions, and be partners in the expedition. We did this before in the Dominican Republic, and it does provide a much greater opportunity for public involvement.

Summary and Conclusions

Part of our charge in managing this site is to find ways of involving the public in its stewardship and protection. We believe the Pomona is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. It deserves recognition as one of the most significant and complete iron-hulled steamers of its type along the California coast. It will be the responsibility for State Parks to continue research efforts, intensify interpretation of the site and involve local divers in its long-term management. Most of the brass and small souvenirs have been removed. Through the construction of a blufftop interpretive station, installation of marker buoys, and recruitment of "site stewards," we hope to perpetuate the Pomona shipwreck site within an expanded underwater park at Ft. Ross.

References Cited

Anonymous

- 1971 Skin Divers Explore Wreck of SS Pomona. Marine Digest 49 (51): 20, 34.

Foster, John W.

- 1981 Diving in Dogholes: the Prospects for Investigating Submerged Cultural Resources in Ft. Ross Cove.
- 1984 "Schooners, Steamers and Spilled Cargo: A Preliminary Underwater Survey of Ft. Ross Cove, California." In: Underwater Archaeology: The Proceedings of the 13th Conference on Underwater Archaeology, Donald H. Keith, editor. pp. 86-94.

Hunter, Jack and Franklin Fisher

- 1989 A Shipwreck Mapping and Recordation Reconnaissance of the Remains of the Steam Ship S.S. Pomona, Fort Ross State Historic Park, Sonoma County, California. MS on file with California State Parks, Sacramento.